

[Review] Melissa Gira Grant (2014) Playing the whore: the work of sex work

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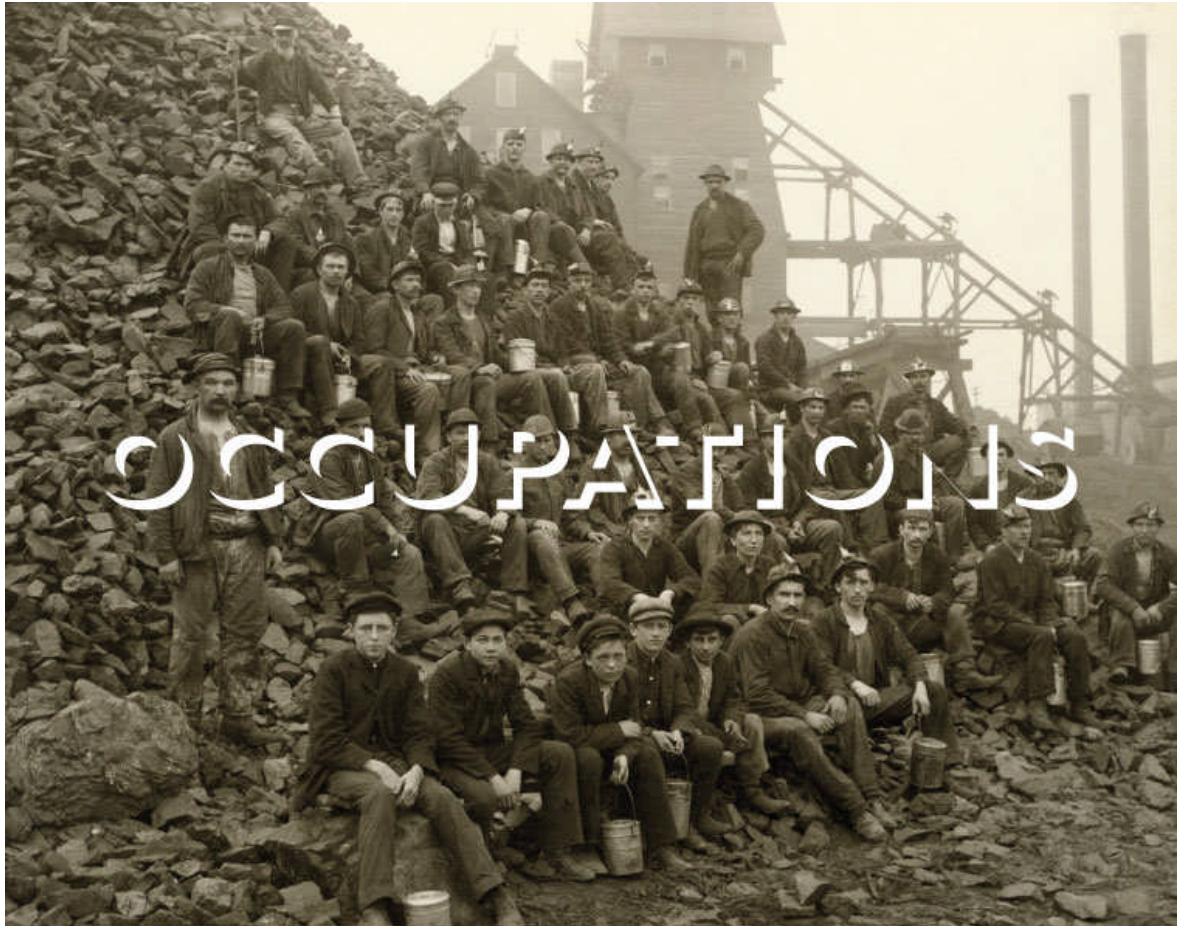
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Reviews

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Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work by
Melissa Gira Grant
London: Verso Books, 2014.

As a journalist, Melissa Gira Grant is quick to point out *Playing the Whore* is not a peep show. It is an impassioned call to refigure the ways in which the public and the lawmakers conceive of sex work; from a hostile atmosphere of law enforcement geared towards punishing the workers themselves to well-meaning but ultimately detrimental anti-prostitution movements. It is a timely read: as of August 2015 Amnesty International declared their support for the global decriminalisation of sex work, following a lengthy investigation into worldwide practices. As Gira Grant explains, this model looks to a future in which sex workers are given the same fundamental labour rights as workers in any other sector.

A strong oeuvre pertaining to sex work as an occupation exists; often by writers who, like Gira Grant, have first-hand experience. *Playing the Whore* earns its place; being in particular a strong companion piece to the recently passed Amnesty policy on ‘state obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil the human rights of sex workers’ (Amnesty International, 2015). Both pieces include definitions of sex work with the terminology of labour, the rejection of the persecution of workers, and recognise of the heterogeneous nature of sex work. Gira Grant identifies two ‘overlapping strands’ of contemporary activism: improving conditions within sex work, and changing external factors that have the greatest impact on sex work. Both share the ‘common purpose to value and believe the experiences’ of sex workers, and it is the latter strand that she is most eager to explore.

To support her argument, Gira Grant uses shocking examples of the worldwide ‘shaming rituals’ enacted by the police, media, and so-called vigilantes. The book opens with a sting in a Fargo hotel, uploaded to a website dedicated to unmasking not just clients but the workers themselves. However, the effect of these examples is not salacious. It is a reminder that the occupation of the sex worker does not envelop their whole identity, and to recognise the workers’ right to be ‘off-the-clock’. Anthropologist Sophie Day describes the mentality of the sex worker in the same way we would conceive of any person clocking in and out: ‘Two bodies that lay inside and outside the person, oriented to different activities and relationships, endowed with distinctive attributes and values’ (Day, 2007). As Gira Grant points out, ‘If a sex worker is always working, always available, she [...] is essentially sexual’ (p.11). She cites the feminist scholar Anne McClintock’s appraisal of the legal system’s exceptionalist treatment of sex work: ‘by obsessively displaying dirty pictures, filmed evidence, confessions, and exhibits, the prostitution trial reveals itself as structured around the very fetishism it sets itself to isolate and punish’ (McClintock, 1992). What emerges is a persuasive argument: reform needs to come from the establishment themselves. The statistics concerning worldwide police behaviour and malpractice cited here, if accurate, indicate an unacceptable attitude to sex workers, and, even more worryingly, to their working hours. Gira Grant uses the voices of her sources sparingly, but on the subject of the police force, the mutual hostility and mistrust is strong. An interesting parallel is drawn between two ‘saviour’ types, the lawmakers and the charitable citizens, and the harm both cause in their ‘crackdowns’ by both seeking to expose workers and perpetuating the blanket stereotype of the sex worker as victim.

Much of the work is preoccupied with the verbal constructions of the sex worker, or the titular 'whore'. Judging by the behaviours that can get a person arrested for solicitation, sex work is largely a 'talking crime', or a crime of signals and inferences. It seems jarring, therefore, that sex workers are silenced to such a degree. To paraphrase the book, a sex worker is only useful to the police at the point of her arrest and then discarded. When a sex worker undertakes political work, the author argues, it is 'still understood as sex, as if we cannot speak without producing pornography' (p.125). Gira Grant's frustration at the boundaries between sex workers and non-sex workers is clear: she describes correspondence coming from those wishing for her to connect them with her sex worker sources to organise narrative on their behalf, not supposing that 'we—are also reporters, academics, filmmakers, and activists, and are doing it ourselves' (p.126).

Amid these persuasive and engaged passages and the well-outlined history of 'sex work' as it is understood now, there is a weaker point made about the history of sexuality that somewhat diverges from the central point, that seems to belong to another book entirely. The author's nod to the fin-de-siècle tendency to categorise sexual 'deviances' is construed in wholly negative light. The policing of preference conversely gave voice and to some extent identity to these 'deviants'. The work of sexologists such as Krafft-Ebing may have been embarked upon as this controlling sweep, but gradually emerged as pioneering and arguably sympathetic works. There are books that draw far stronger parallels between the plight of sex workers and the LGBT community; such as Melinda Chateauvert's 2014 exploration of the movement from Stonewall onwards, *Sex Workers Unite* (Chateauvert, 2014). Additionally, the 'us versus them' tone of *Playing the Whore* is self-serving and fitting with the existing literature, but perhaps jarring with her goal of not just solidarity, but support.

A sticking point in my own reading of the text was Gira Grant's position on feminism and its rapport with sex work. Surely what we have learnt from the text is that there is no standard experience of sex work, and equally there is no way to homogenously describe the efforts of the feminist movement—and indeed, the two are not mutually exclusive positions. Gira Grant uses the example of Kate Millet's admittedly patronising view of prostitutes being guided towards 'feminist consciousness raising' by their 'sisters' in *The Prostitution Papers* (Millet, 1974), but fails to recognise the efforts of non-sex worker feminists who share her position;

possibly enabled by her belief that 'if a woman is 'other', then the whore is the 'other's other' (p.77).

Playing the Whore is a measured and concise examination of the occupation as it stands now. Even readers that strongly agree with criminalisation will find much here to challenge this position; and for those who advocate decriminalisation or have an interest in labour rights, this book is essential reading. It provides the reader with an immediate sense of what is at stake if sex work continues to be stigmatised.

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